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SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: MEDIA REACTION TO GENERAL PETRAEUS'S VISIT

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11. (U) Summary: CENTCOM Commander General David Petraeus's February 16-17 visit to Tashkent received broad media coverage in the local, state-run press, the international media and wire services, and on GOU-controlled and independent news websites. There was much speculation that his trip was linked to the Manas Air Base closure in

Kyrgyzstan, and potential transit routes in support of operations in Afghanistan. End summary.

Official Media Leads with General's Visit

12. (U) President Karimov's meeting with General Petraeus led the GOU-controlled Uzbek Television First Channel's evening news program "Axborot" (Report) in both the Uzbek and Russian language broadcasts.

The identical report also opened Yoshlar's (Uzbek Channel 2) "Dav'r" news program. Each segment featured President Karimov saying: "We consider your visit to Uzbekistan as a visit of the first representative of the new administration of the USA, of President [Barack] Obama, and as the USA's aspiration to establishing closer, mutually beneficial relations with Uzbekistan. Therefore we attach great significance to our talks."

13. (U) The Uzbekistan National News Agency's (UzA) press release on the General's visit was widely reprinted in state media, adding that they discussed "issues of mutual interesting (sic) including strengthening of regional security, stabilization of the situation in

Afghanistan, fighting against international terrorism, drug trafficking, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction." This release, coupled with large photos, appeared on the front pages of leading government-dailies Halq So'zi, Narodnoye Slovo, Toshkent Haqiqati, Tashkentskaya Pravda, and Toshkent Oqshomi, and weeklies Uzbekistan Today, Hurriyat, Mahalla, Ma'rifat, and Turkiston. International Wires Link Visit to Afghan Supply Routes

14. (U) Reuters claimed that General Petraeus came "to secure alternative supply routes for forces fighting in Afghanistan" yet quoted the Embassy spokesperson that "he is here in Tashkent to listen to Uzbekistan's perspective...on the situation in Afghanistan"

and added that the spokesperson "declined to say whether a supply agreement might be signed during the visit." The Agence France Presse's (AFP) local stringer echoed that the General visited "in search of new supply routes into war-racked Afghanistan," but also quoted the Embassy and the UzA release which made no mention of transit talks. AFP reported that "Washington has been seeking agreements with ex-Soviet states in Central Asia to host supply routes, and Uzbekistan is considered a prime candidate due to its extensive railway links with Afghanistan," yet quoted the State Department spokesperson in a separate article that General Petraeus's

visit was "not about supply routes or...the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan." Associated Press (AP) stories focused on developments in Kyrgyzstan, noting that General Petraeus was in Uzbekistan. (Note:

AP journalists can work in Kyrgyzstan. Multiple attempts to accredit

AP stringers in Uzbekistan have been unsuccessful.)

15. (U) Russian ITAR-TASS and Interfax stated that the CENTCOM Commander was on a working visit to Uzbekistan, adding that "Russia and Kazakhstan have already approved the ground transit of non-military cargoes for the coalition forces" in Afghanistan and "according to the Russian Foreign Ministry, a load of uniforms and food" would soon depart Latvia. Kazakh AKIPress and Canadian Canwest

News Service released short factual pieces on the visit. Trend News Agency from Azerbaijan quoted a Russian analyst saying that "Petraeus's visit to Tashkent is key to securing oneself if the negotiations on Manas fail, because this base is too important for the United States." Another Trend News Agency Report quoted an International Crisis Group analyst stating that "political resonance in America regarding opening of this base in Uzbekistan will be very negative because of the poor reputation of Uzbekistan in the sphere of human rights."

Independent Websites Speculate on Future U.S. Basing Rights

16. (U) Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Uzbek service ("Ozodlik") posted a brief factual report on the visit, and two opinion pieces entitled: "The U.S. is Dreaming of Khanabad Again" and "The Good and Bad Sides of Becoming Close to Tashkent." The latter articles quoted

Embassy sources (with mixed accuracy) and speculated that "though U.S. officials deny and the Uzbek officials keep silent on this, the majority of the political scientists believe that the focal point of discussion between Washington and Tashkent today is [the] Khanabad base." Ozodlik added that "it is impossible to continue operations in Afghanistan without the creation of a new base in the region, if Manas is closed. On the other hand, it is not good for Obama's

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reputation to come near to one of the world's most authoritarian president, Islam Karimov." Numerous GOU-controlled websites posted the UzA press release verbatim. Independent ferghana.ru drew from RIA Novosti wire reports for its "Uzbekistan: President Karimov Hopes

for Cooperation with the New U.S. Administration" article. The BBC's

Uzbek service, The Financial Times, independent uzmetronom.com and uznews.net posted short, factual updates. Uznews.net added that

"rumors that the USA will search for a new base for its troops in Central Asia - in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan - spread after neighboring

Kyrgyzstan announces (sic) on 3 February that it intended to stop U.S.

troops from leasing the military base at Bishkek's Manas airport, needed for supporting U.S. troops deployed in Afghanistan."

17. (U) Comment: While not yet final during the General's visit, the then pending Kyrgyz parliamentary vote to close the U.S. Airbase in Manas added urgency, importance, and great international media speculation to General Petraeus's meetings in Uzbekistan. The local,

state-controlled media gave front-page, lead-story billing to the visit, demonstrating top GOU support for a deepening of U.S.-Uzbek relations, particularly in the area of security cooperation. Indeed,

at a February 25 press conference with visiting Turkmen President Berdymukhamedov, President Karimov publicly confirmed that Uzbekistan

will support commercial transit of non-lethal equipment to U.S. forces in Afghanistan. End comment.

NORLAND

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